
MEMORANDUM

To: Senator Tom Harkin

From: Senator Mark Begich

Cc: Bethany Little, Chief Education Counsel, HELP Committee

Date: August 4, 2010

Re: Conceptual Language for Upcoming ESEA Reauthorization Bill

Thank you for this opportunity to suggest conceptual language for the rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Along with the overall education reform priorities I described in my letter, I believe the following specific issues must be addressed as your Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) writes its ESEA bill. These ideas are in response to the U.S. Department of Education's *A Blueprint for Reform*, comments from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and the result of discussions with many education stakeholders in Alaska.

- ***Less emphasis on competitive funding, more on fair formulas for small districts*** – I understand and support the value of competitive funding in fostering educational innovation. The *Race to the Top* and *Investing in Innovation* initiatives appear to be generating creative and positive change in some states and school districts. I know, too, federal education funding for children in schools most in need, such as Title I, IDEA, and the program for rural schools (REAP), will remain formula-based and will not be reduced under the President's plan. Further, the President proposes increased funding to invest in teachers, and to meet the needs of English Learners and students with disabilities. However, there is concern in Alaska over too much emphasis in the *Blueprint* on competitive funding, especially among our many small and remote rural districts. They fear they will lose out because they lack resources to develop truly competitive grant applications. These concerns appear to be valid given, for instance, the Administration's FY2011 education budget mostly holds the line on basic formula funding while boosting competitive programs by roughly \$3 billion. A reauthorized ESEA needs language assuring small districts, many of which already struggle to meet current definitions of educational progress, still receive their fair shares. I'm aware the *Blueprint* recognizes this issue and says the Secretary "may" reserve

technical assistance and research funds “to help rural districts overcome common capacity constraints” as they apply for competitive grants. For my state “may” is not nearly a strong enough word.

- ***A fifth school “turnaround” option or, at a minimum, more flexibility to improve struggling schools*** – I believe the new ESEA must offer a turnaround option in addition to the four models outlined in the Administration’s *Blueprint*. Perhaps a fifth choice recognizing the added challenges of alternative schools or districts with high percentages of low-income and English Learner populations. One idea is the chance to combine various *Blueprint* proposals such as more research-based intervention, additional staff development, or community-driven charter schools. Alaska needs a flexible intervention model allowing a school to evaluate, keep and provide professional development for a principal rather than requiring automatic replacement. As for the *Blueprint*’s proposal to replace up to half the teaching staff, a massive dismissal would rarely be practical in rural America and remotest Alaska, where quality educators are difficult to recruit and retain. Alaska already faces very high teacher and principal turnover in our rural districts, and we are not alone in our concerns. A recent letter to Education Secretary Arne Duncan signed by chief school officers from 13 states says: “The challenges of these lowest performing districts do not rest solely on the backs of their principal, and we struggle to find quality administrators willing to take the helm of a school in such dire circumstances. Further, the idea of firing half the staff at these schools and finding replacements is a virtual impossibility. We are asking for flexibility for intervention programs that work in the specific communities that can truly address the roots of the issues our students face, such as extreme poverty, isolation and lack of quality services.” I agree.
- ***Sensible rules for Supplemental Education Services (SES) and required tutoring*** – Under current law, when schools do not meet Adequate Yearly Progress for a second consecutive year, families are offered the choice of sending students to other schools (though not required in small and remote districts). In the third year, families get supplemental services for their students (basically, free tutoring). This is backwards. I believe schools should be required to offer free tutoring first, with the goal of making enough academic progress to avoid the more serious and disruptive requirement of school choice. Also, current law says SES tutoring must be provided by teachers not at that school, which is not feasible in much of rural Alaska or other remote areas of the country. Nor is it practical if the school can provide services from

a teacher in the building who has a proven track record of success. The ESEA rewrite should add district teachers to the list of tutoring providers. Even though these concerns are sometimes addressed through waivers in current law, such waivers shouldn't be necessary.

- ***Emphasis on innovation and school improvement at the local level*** – I support the *Blueprint's* proposed *Successful, Safe and Healthy Students* program, in part because it mirrors examples of school-centered community change already underway in Alaska. Publicly reporting information on school climate is a good idea, as is more community support for school success. I urge the HELP committee to write this newly proposed program into the ESEA bill and strengthen the suggested priority for grants between school districts and local non-profits. Better education outcomes are not just the job of teachers, principals and students but, rather, the entire community. In addition, the *Investing in Innovation* program, which allows schools, districts and communities to collaborate on unique and often “out-of-the-box” initiatives to improve student outcomes, should be built into permanent law.
- ***Standards preparing students for university and vocational programs, without the need for remediation*** – As we move forward, a clear definition of “college- and career-ready” is essential. Except for issues of language or disability, our high school graduates never should have to take remedial classes when they start college or begin vocational-education programs. I urge you to include language in the reauthorization bill requiring states to develop school standards in conjunction with their university programs, or to work with other states on common core standards. A high school diploma should mean our students are ready now, not after catch-up classes.
- ***Stronger support for science and technology education, especially engineering*** – I am encouraged by the *Blueprint's* focus on science, teaching, engineering and mathematics and will introduce legislation to increase student achievement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Engineering and energy-technology jobs are the wave of the future, especially in Alaska and other resource-rich states. (I believe, too, a fully-rounded education produces informed and engaged citizens. For that reason, we should strengthen requirements for arts-related education, eventually moving forward from “STEM” to “STEAM.”)